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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MUTHARIKA'S LEADERSHIP STYLE

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Introduction

1. Despite a year of solid success in imposing discipline on government spending and launching a strong anti-corruption campaign, President Mutharika has been frustrated in his reform agenda by an increasingly militant opposition and a weak civil service. A series of negative media stories has plagued Mutharika, caused in part by his administration's poor public communication. Both successes and failures can be attributed to the president's leadership style. This cable provides some impressions of that leadership, based on frequent observance of the president in meetings and at public events, and from conversations with his family members, senior advisors, business leaders, and other diplomats.

Lonely at the Top

2. Every president faces challenges in getting honest and accurate advice and in motivating subordinates to carry out his or her agenda. For President Mutharika, this has been particularly difficult. Mutharika is a political outsider, having spent much of his career outside of Malawi working in organizations like the World Bank and COMESA. He does not have firsthand knowledge of the backgrounds of key political players. As one business leader told us, "He doesn't know who's who in the zoo." In setting out a bold reform program, breaking with the party that put him in power, and pursuing corruption cases against many of his former cabinet colleagues, the president quickly made plenty of enemies.

3. For all of these reasons, Mutharika is isolated, and has very few advisors that he can trust. His vice president and several of his cabinet ministers are holdovers from the previous administration, and some have allegations of corruption hanging over their heads. One family member recently told the Charge that Mutharika has virtually no one outside his immediate family who can give him honest face-to-face feedback.

4. Although he has a warm personality and keen sense of humor, Mutharika allows the trappings of the office to make him appear aloof to the public and to his own ministers and subordinates. He always travels in a multi-vehicle motorcade with a heavy security force. His public appearances are always carefully staged and scripted, with throngs of singing and dancing women, formal speeches, and most of the cabinet in attendance, regardless of the nature of the event. Everywhere he walks in public, aides lay red carpet in advance of his arrival. Everyone addresses him as "Your Excellency" and he carries an air of being untouchable.

A Distaste for Politics

5. According to one of his family members, Mutharika "hates politics" and takes no pleasure in engaging his political foes. He is a technocrat who only wants to focus on fixing the country's problems, particularly its economy, and would prefer not to be bothered with the game of politics.

6. His dislike of politics contributes to an obsession that borders on paranoia about the political machinations of former president Bakili Muluzi. The president and his family see Muluzi as the negative force behind most of the problems that have befallen the administration. In their view, Muluzi uses his ill-gotten wealth to bribe MPs and journalists to oppose the president's policies and damage his image. Mutharika is absolutely convinced that Muluzi paid two journalists to write a story about ghosts in the presidential mansion that ran on the international wires in March. Mutharika was highly embarrassed by the story, had the journalists arrested and detained for two days, and is still

demanding a public apology from them. The president recently told Charge that Muluzi had assigned certain MPs to heckle him during his recent address to Parliament. Mutharika and his family strongly believe that Muluzi destroyed the moral fiber of the country by facilitating corruption and encouraging a beggar mentality with international donors.

17. Mutharika's lack of political acumen contributed to an awkward and controversial launch of his new political party (reftel). He seems unable to distinguish good political advice from bad, and his close advisors have offered him plenty of the latter. The rush to launch the new party following Mutharika's resignation from the UDF has yielded a party that has no ideological base and is simply a collection of personalities. Politicians who jumped ship to join the president's new party were widely seen as blatant opportunists. The ill-conceived formation of that party is the one act that has seriously damaged Mutharika's credibility in the eyes of ordinary Malawians.

A Formal Business Style

18. Like most Malawians, the president is very polite and formal. He prefers formal meetings to informal gatherings. Such meetings tend to feature much polite discourse but little honest debate or exchange of ideas. Late last year the donor heads of mission began a series of quarterly meetings with him, the first two of which were very stiff and formal and achieved little. Mutharika hosted the meetings in his ornate cabinet room, sitting on a throne adorned with images of lions. In the manner of a king, he sat in the center of the room with his cabinet ministers on one side and donors seated opposite. Needless to say, the setting did not encourage honest and informal dialogue. Ministers tell us that cabinet meetings are the same sort of stiff affairs, and that they too have difficulty in communicating openly with the president.

19. More recently, the heads of mission have sent a "troika" of three representatives to speak with Mutharika in a smaller forum, without any ministers present. This has proven somewhat more successful, and the president seemed to like the format. He invited all of the heads back within two weeks for a follow-up meeting, and made enthusiastic references to his discussion with the "troika."

Demanding Results

10. Perhaps because of his experience working in international organizations, Mutharika places a high premium on action and results. He has a vision of where he wants to take Malawi, and he expects his ministers and civil servants to deliver. This sort of accountability has been unknown in Malawi since the days of Hastings Banda, and many civil servants are struggling to cope with his demands. Mutharika requires monthly progress reports from each ministry. He has fired and reshuffled a number of top-level civil servants, which has caused no small amount of consternation among the government rank and file. In a recent meeting with donor heads, the president complained that one of his biggest challenges has been to motivate the civil service to actively carry out his programs.

11. In private meetings with ministers and subordinates, Mutharika tends to ask pointed questions that intimidate his interlocutors. According to family members, he does not mean to harass his subordinates, but wants straight answers to his questions. In response, his advisors tell him what they think he wants to hear. One senior advisor told Charge that none of the ministers or senior advisors will ever give the president bad news.

A Visionary, But Not a Great Communicator

12. Mutharika is a man of vision, a leader who likes to look at the "big picture." He often speaks of visionary ideas for the nation, such as major infrastructure projects, irrigation schemes, a new technology university, and other grand concepts. He is not afraid to dream out loud and express his hopes for a more prosperous future for Malawi. But when it comes to communicating the day-to-day business of his administration, the president has failed miserably.

13. The administration's public communication apparatus is broken. The minister of information is supposedly the government spokesman, but he is not part of Mutharika's inner circle, a fact that is often painfully clear in his public pronouncements. Official proclamations come alternatively from the chief secretary of the presidency or the State House chief of staff. Major policy initiatives are often announced verbally by ministers in media interviews, and are frequently misquoted or inaccurately reported by Malawi's poorly trained

reporters. The information ministry does not give regular media briefings, nor does it publish regular announcements. Its media management is entirely reactive, and it is constantly on the back foot in responding to negative stories.

¶14. Because of this poor media management, negative stories that begin as rumors are allowed to grow into full-blown scandals before the administration is able to respond. Mutharika and his family attribute their negative press coverage to the fact that the two main national daily papers are owned by opposition figures, and that Muluzi is paying journalists to write negative stories.

¶15. More effective media management could easily solve most of the administration's communications problems. The Charge has approached ministers, senior advisors, and family members on numerous occasions to discuss the problem and offer advice. Other donors, including the head of mission "troika" have discussed the issue with the president. The Embassy's public affairs office is bringing a U.S. expert in September to conduct workshops on how to run a government press office with the information ministry and other government offices, and the UN office is working on a similar program. Mutharika and his advisors seem to be aware of the problem, but so far have taken no concrete action to address it.

Leading in the Right Direction, But Will Malawi Follow?

¶16. In spite of these problems, Mutharika is leading Malawi in the right direction. For the first time in many years, government is acting responsibly to enforce fiscal discipline and the rule of law. If successful, the effort will encourage the investment and long-term economic growth that the country so desperately needs. Donors have responded with new budgetary support, and Malawi is on track to restore its relations with the IMF and establish a new Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility. The country is an MCA Threshold Program participant and should be a good candidate for an eventual MCA Compact if reforms continue.

¶17. Malawians cherish their new democracy, and have no desire to return to the days of the Banda dictatorship. The Muluzi period is widely seen as a "lost decade" in which the country gained political freedom but slipped backward in its economic development. Malawians are hopeful for positive change and sense that Mutharika can deliver. The real question is whether Mutharika will be able to lead against entrenched political interests to push through meaningful and long-lasting reform.

GILMOUR